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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000115

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Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik for Reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary. In the run up to the Bucharest Summit, Slovakia is discussing with Canada the possibility of providing an OMLT in Kandahar. Meanwhile, the GOS continues to flesh out with the Dutch plans for additional deployments in Uruzgan Province. Based on increases already approved by the Slovak Parliament in December 2007, Slovakia's total deployment to Afghanistan in 2008 would approach 115. (Note: MFA informed us that an additional 15 officers would be serve at ISAF HQ). Contacts at MFA and MOD underscore, however, that prospects for lifting restrictive national caveats are slim. On a more positive note, the GOS has responded to our consistent urging and has begun to develop public diplomacy plans to gain greater support for Slovak deployments to Afghanistan. Ambassador Obsitnik will convey our messages on Afghanistan (and Missile Defense) to new Defense Minister Baska during their March 17 meeting and during his upcoming lunch with the Prime Minister. End summary

12. (c) In a March 11 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, MFA Director for Security Juraj Podhorsky expanded on Foreign Minister Kubis's earlier comments to the Ambassador on Slovakia's plans for Afghanistan (ref b). Podhorsky confirmed that Slovak and Canadian defense officials had held expert level talks the week of March 3 to discuss the possibility that Slovakia would deploy an OMLT (12-16 persons) to a Canadian base (NFI) in Kandahar. In response to Pol/Econ Chief's query, Podhorsky said that Slovakia's restrictive caveats, which would also apply to any potential OMLT, were unlikely to be lifted anytime soon.

13. (C) The MFA would like to announce cooperation with the Canadians at the Bucharest Summit, and, according to Podhorsky, FM Kubis has urged Defense Minister Baska to expedite MOD's consideration and review of the proposal. Meanwhile, the Slovaks continue to consult with the Dutch regarding the implementation of plans outlined this fall for Slovak cooperation with the Dutch in Uruzgan Province. (Note: In December, the Slovak Parliament approved an increase of 52 soldiers to Afghanistan. Phase two of the plan discussed in the fall, but not yet finalized, featured the deployment of two additional platoons to Uruzgan.) If approved, these additional contributions to Uruzgan and Kandahar would boost the Slovak troop presence to over 200 by early 2009. Given ongoing discussions with the Dutch and Canadians, Podhorsky deemed it "premature" to consider additional support to PRTs in Nimroz and Dai Kundi.

4.(C) Podhorsky also announced that an ad hoc group composed of MFA and MOD officials would meet for the first time the week of March 17 to discuss proposals for a public diplomacy campaign aimed at building Slovak awareness of and support for NATO and, in particular, its mission in Afghanistan. The first salvo, according to Podhorsky, will be an upcoming joint op-ed by FM Kubis and Dutch FM Verhagen on Afghanistan. This is an initiative we suggested to then-MOD State Secretary Baska and to MFA a few months ago. Among the events

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planned are: a visit by Slovak journalists to Afghanistan and a conference in Bratislava in which Dutch and Slovak NGOs and experts will discuss lessons learned and avenues for potential projects for Afghan reconstruction and development. (Comment: This initiative, though slow in coming, is welcome and timely: public support for NATO and Slovak participation in Afghanistan is low and declining. Post will look for ways to support, and if appropriate, participate in this nascent effort. End Comment.)

15. (C) Comment: Slovakia is moving -- incrementally - in the right direction on Afghanistan, but the value of Slovakia's contribution is lessened by the Prime Minister's insistence on strict caveats. Discussions with a wide variety of interlocutors suggest to us that PM Fico's risk-averse approach to Afghanistan reflects less a genuine fear of public outcry or backlash in the case of casualties, than the simple fact that NATO and Afghanistan are not among his priorities. As Fico told the Ambassador in December: "We are a member of NATO, but our priority is the EU." Because Fico associates NATO with U.S. leadership and policy, he is even less inclined to make investments or sacrifices in this arena, and the invocation of caveats by numerous NATO Allies gives him the cover he needs to continue on a path that shortchanges both the Alliance and Slovakia (particularly its own military). Although it is not clear how hard they are pushing the issue with the Prime Minister, FM Kubis and the military already understand this. We will continue to press on caveats at every opportunity -- next at the Ambassador's meeting with Defense Minister Baska on March 17 and in his upcoming lunch with PM Fico -- and we will urge our European partners to deliver the same message. A joint approach will be needed to convince PM Fico that more is expected of Slovakia. End Comment.

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